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Highly Sensitive Child Parenting Strategies

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Are you raising a child who seems different from other kids? Maybe you can't quite put your finger on it. Your little one is bright, intuitive, and in many ways ahead of what you'd expect for their age. Yet they struggle with seemingly routine things or can sometimes become upset at what feels like a drop of a dime.

You might have a highly sensitive child.

As a child psychologist who's heavily trained in diagnosing and treating childhood mental health issues, I admit this one's new for me! We didn't learn about high sensitivity in our doctoral program. I'm guessing this might be because being highly sensitive isn't a diagnosis or a mental health disorder.

I learned about this term — **highly sensitive person, or HSP** for short — more recently. As I read, researched, and learned more and more about HSPs, I realized how much I identify as one. I was also likely a highly sensitive child, or HSC, but I didn't know it back then.

Highly sensitive children have so many strengths, but they also have unique needs that easily get missed. Highly sensitive kids don't always look like they need help. They're bright, intuitive children who might put on a brave face like everything's okay when there are actually signs that they could use some extra support.

After months of research I've come to find that even the most reputable parenting books and resources out there don't address how to help a sensitive child. So I wrote this guide to help you not only begin to understand your highly sensitive child, but also some highly sensitive child parenting strategies.

Highly Sensitive Child Traits

Before we jump into some highly sensitive child parenting strategies, it's important to understand highly sensitive child traits.

In general, HSPs:

- Notice more cues in their environment than others
- Have stronger internal responses (physical reactions, mental processing, emotions)

In other words, HSPs and HSCs tend to notice more, think about it more, and feel more. But that's grossly over-simplifying it, so let's dig a little deeper into highly sensitive child traits.

IT'S A TRAIT, NOT A DISORDER

Being highly sensitive is thought to be an innate, neurobiological trait that about 1 in 5 people have (about 20-30% of people). This means that HSPs have a nervous system (the brain) that notices and processes subtle information more deeply. Researchers have called being highly sensitive “environmental sensitivity” or “sensory processing sensitivity,” not to be confused with sensory processing disorder. In fact, being highly sensitive isn't a mental health disorder or diagnosis at all. It's an inborn trait that explains how a highly sensitive person processes information and behaves. It's an innate part of their temperament and personality.

According to Dr. Elaine Aron, clinical psychologist and one of the leading researchers of HSPs, being highly sensitive is a normal variation of human temperament and personality. All people vary in how they process information in their environment and how they respond. For example, sitting in a room full of people with the TV on and music playing, some people may not even notice or be able to easily tune out the TV and music. Others might notice the TV or music playing but can carry on a conversation, no problem. A few people may be distracted or even bothered by the background noises and become overwhelmed by all of the stimuli happening at once. HSPs are those few people. HSPs and highly sensitive kids perceive and process cues from their environment more strongly and thoroughly.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILD



So you might be wondering, *is my child highly sensitive?* Highly sensitive children have some key characteristics:

1. Highly sensitive children **notice more in their environment** and take in more sensory information than other kids. They may notice subtleties and changes that other kids don't. For example, HSCs might be bothered by faint sounds or startled by loud ones, be bothered by wetness on their clothes, or detect subtle smells or flavors in food. They may also feel more sensitive or hurt by gentle teasing from loved ones or perceive typical kid play like the swings as too high or risky.
2. Another highly sensitive child trait is **processing information more thoroughly**. HSCs prefer to observe and think before they act. They generally operate very conscientiously and carefully as a result and may appear quiet or shy. Some are also very creative as a result of their thoughtful and thorough thinking processes.

3. Highly sensitive kids have a **strong sense of empathy** for others. They take on the emotions of people and even animals around them. HSCs notice and spend more time thinking about social cues, like people's facial expressions, tone of voice, and emotions.
4. Highly sensitive children are **easily overwhelmed** by the high levels of stimulation they experience. They're more affected by unexpected or sudden changes in plans. HSCs are easily overstimulated and can become tired or overwhelmed more quickly.
5. Due to the high levels of noticing, thinking, and feeling, highly sensitive kids are **susceptible to shutting down, tantrums, and meltdowns**. This is usually the result of information or emotion overload from what is thought of typical kid activities, like a birthday party or the playing at the park, rather than defiance.

THE HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILD IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Some ways that highly sensitive child traits might play out in everyday life include:

- Using big words or asking lots of thought-provoking questions
- Seeming mature for their age or ahead of their years
- Preferring quiet play over rough and tumble or high-action play
- Having difficulty going to bed especially after an exciting day
- Being uncomfortable or having trouble adjusting to sudden or unexpected changes
- Being easily bothered by scratchy clothing, loud noises, or smells of food
- Showing deep care and nurture of their friends, animals, and living things and having strong feelings and empathy when people or animals are injured

Highly Sensitive Child Parenting Strategies

Given what we know about HSCs and their unique strengths and needs, supporting and disciplining a highly sensitive child comes with special considerations. Disciplining a highly sensitive child by adjusting your discipline approach to match your child's temperament will help them learn and succeed. Here are some highly sensitive child parenting strategies that address your child's unique needs.

HOW TO HELP A SENSITIVE CHILD

- **Provide lots of downtime.** A highly sensitive child can become easily overstimulated and overwhelmed by bigger groups (even a classroom of kids), sounds, and feelings. Providing plenty of

downtime with quiet or relaxing activities can help your child decompress and recharge.

- **Provide structure and routine.** Like most kids, highly sensitive kids thrive with structure and routine. Having a predictable and familiar routine helps kids feel safe and know what to expect. Avoid abrupt changes when possible. Of course, in life, things will come up. When plan changes are unavoidable, provide your highly sensitive child with as much notice as possible. This will give them time to adjust. Praise their cooperation even though it was hard for them to quickly shift gears.
- **Encourage and praise their strengths.** All kids thrive off of praise, and highly sensitive children need lots of encouragement and feedback too. When it comes to praising your highly sensitive child, reinforce their strengths, such as noticing their thoughtfulness or empathy for others. This will help normalize and humanize their feelings.
- **Teach feeling words.** Highly sensitive kids feel many emotions, sometimes more strongly than others. [Young children might show how they feel with their behaviors.](#) Help your highly sensitive child learn feeling words to help them verbalize and better communicate how they feel with you.
- **Understand your own temperament as a parent.** For example, are you someone who loves to talk and talks a lot? Do you thrive in groups or in high-energy environments? Or does your temperament match your highly sensitive child to some degree? Knowing your own temperament and personality can help you begin to understand how your needs may match or differ from those of your highly sensitive child.

DISCIPLINING A HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILD

When it comes to disciplining a highly sensitive child, many parents express challenges with knowing what to say and do. HSCs are more sensitive to criticism and correction, and parents are understandably concerned about being too harsh or hurting their child's feelings. Yet, all children, including highly sensitive kids, need a parent who can discipline in a way that helps them learn and grow.

- **Validate your child's feelings.** Start by acknowledging your child's feelings. This will help them feel heard and understood. It will also help your highly sensitive child understand their own emotions. You could say, "I see that you're frustrated," or "I know that made you sad." Showing empathy can also help your highly sensitive child become more receptive to your upcoming feedback.
- **Start with a positive.** The phrase "connect before you correct" is key here. Notice a positive or bring up what they are doing well before you provide feedback and correction.
- **Use a neutral tone of voice.** Speaking in a neutral tone and volume will make it easier for your highly sensitive child to be receptive and understand your feedback. It can help them focus on the message instead of becoming overwhelmed.

· **Be direct and consistent.** Tell your child exactly what your expectations are. Be clear and consistent with your rules. Even though it can be tempting to bend the rules to avoid upsetting a sensitive child, too many exceptions actually make it harder for them to learn in the long run. Sensitive children do best when things are predictable.

Having a highly sensitive child is a gift, and your child has many strengths like a strong intuition, empathy, and creativity. Highly sensitive children also have unique needs. If you feel like you're struggling with raising your highly sensitive child, it may help to have an outside perspective. It's important to consult with someone who specializes in the unique needs of how to help a sensitive child.

As a licensed psychologist, child behavior expert, and HSP myself, I have the unique ability to guide parents in using specialized skills to support their HSP child's needs. I provide [parent consultation and support](#) at Atlas Psychology. Reach out to learn more!



MEET THE AUTHOR | AMY NASAMRAN, PH.D.

I'm Amy, a licensed psychologist, author, and child behavior expert. I specialize in working with people at two of my favorite stages in life: early childhood and early adulthood. [Atlas Psychology](#) was founded to provide community-driven, evidence-based education and mental health therapy for children, parents, and young adults.

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